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ABSTRACT

Although she encountered criticism of her work, Harriet Martineau was the most widely read economics educator of 19th century Great Britain. Martineau wrote for the masses; she was convinced that it was each citizen's civic duty to learn economics. She relied on the body of knowledge which existed in her day: Mill's "Elements of Political Economy," Smith's "Wealth of Nations," and Malthus' "Essay on Population." It was not her intent to add to the body of economic knowledge, but rather to translate that knowledge to the common person. Her volumes, "Illustrations of Political Economy" (1832-1834), consisted of 25 tales, one published each month. Each tale illustrated a different economic concept which Martineau considered crucial to the working person. Throughout each narrative was an explanation of an economic principle and an accompanying analysis of how contemporary misguided legislation had resulted in unnecessary events. Her contemporaries criticized her largely for her lack of originality, although she had expressly stated her purpose for writing. The criticism did not deter sales; by 1834 ten thousand copies of the monthly number of the series were being sold. Later in life, Martineau presented lectures on contemporary political and economic topics and on practical advice on running a farm. (KC)

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Harriet Martineau: Principal Economic Educator

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- Abstract -

Harriet Martineau was the most widely read economic educator of the nineteenth century. Nearly a quarter of a million copies of her lessons on economics were produced and sold during the 1800's. Martineau wrote for mass consumption: she was convinced that it was each citizen's civic duty to learn economics in order to counteract the follies of economic policy makers.

Martineau believed that economic principles could best reach her audience through simple stories. She attempted to introduce the concepts of production, distribution, and consumption, in addition to the ideas surrounding factor shares, monopolies, foreign trade, and taxation through tales which depicted the ordinary activities of the working class.

Although criticized by some contemporaries for being unoriginal, absurdly simplistic, and melancholic, her works were an enormous success. More importantly, her goal was achieved - she had reached the masses and had imparted to them core ideas in economics.

The paper examines Martineau's work through an examination of her Illustrations of Political Economy, 1832-1834. The plan of her work is presented in general and one of the tales of the series is analyzed specifically.

A brief review of some of the criticism she encountered is presented and is contrasted with the success of her work. Finally to broaden the reader's picture of Miss Martineau, a cursory review of her other works and deeds is offered.

Introduction

Harriet Martineau deserves a place in the history of economic ideas. Although not an innovator in economic theory, she was certainly a pioneer in economic education. This paper is intended to serve as an introduction of this special economic writer to economic educators - to help them identify their roots.

Martineau, of French Hugenot descent was born in the small town of Norwich in Britain in 1802. She was deafened in early childhood and was an invalid for most of her life; she "took to her bed" in 1855 and wrote her autobiography knowing her days on earth were numbered. However, she lived another twenty years (she died in 1876) and was an active contributor to literary circles until shortly before her death.

Martineau was a very independent woman. Her determination to write, to instruct was strong. Because of her handicap, the usual role of classroom teacher was denied her, but she persevered in her object to teach using the written word. Her selection of economics as a crucial area of instruction was extremely daring in an age when women were scorned as writers and it was commonly believed that their ability to engage in higher reasoning was questionable. For all her outgoing tendencies, however, Martineau was not trying to compete with the classical economists. She was trying to complement their work. Harriet Martineau discovered a niche in the growing body of economic knowledge. She found that small hole where she could use her teaching talents to expand the influence of economics in society.

We will examine Martineau's work in economic education through an examination of her Illustrations of Political Economy, 1832-34. After an introductory section, we will look at the plan of her work, and scrutinize one of the tales in the series. Then a brief review of some of the criticism she encountered will be presented and contrasted with the success of her work. Finally, to

broaden the picture of Miss Martineau, we will give a cursory glance to some of her other works and deeds.

The Beginnings of Economic Education

In 1832, a young Harriet Martineau, inspired by the work of the first economic educator, Jane Marcet, began writing a series of instructive tracts in political economy. Martineau's predecessor, Jane Marcet, had completed Conversations on Political Economy in 1816 but had directed it toward a very exclusive audience comprised of young people of the middle and upper classes. Marcet relied heavily on the principles presented by Adam Smith in the Wealth of Nations and also quoted liberally from Malthus's Principles of Political Economy.[1] Marcet's pedagogical technique was a somewhat stilted conversation between Caroline and Mrs. B in which Caroline asked questions which required Mrs. B to discourse on pertinent economic theories.

Martineau saw the need for economic education, not of the elite, but of the masses. In the preface to the first number of Illustrations of Political Economy she presented the rationale for her work: "Political Economy has been studied less than perhaps any other science whatever, and not at all by those whom it most concerns, - the mass of people."[2] She went on to point out that it was the obligation of every citizen to become economically aware so that he might upgrade the polity: "... errors of national management, must be traced to their source and the principles of a better economy are established. It is the duty of the people to do this."[3] Martineau was well aware of the problem faced by economic educators. Initial rejection of the discipline by most people did not daunt her spirits; rather it inspired her to overcome this obstacle by a novel and more palatable presentation of economic principles than had ever been attempted to that point in time.

Harriet Martineau was not naive. She expected a negative reaction to the presentation that she planned for the esoteric doctrines of the masters. Nevertheless she pressed her point:

> If this is folly, if this is neglect, if this is madness, it is no more than as many people are guilty of, as refuse to hear anything of Political Economy, because it is new, or because it is dull, or because it is difficult. No one could make any of these objections, if he knew the nature, or saw anything of the utility and the beauty of the science.[4]

Her task was the straightforward one of unmasking the beautiful elements in economics.

Admiring the precision of the economic thinkers of her day, Martineau recognized that to obtain order out of confusion "formality should be the order of the day" and that "truths should be offered in a cold dry form, and should be left bare of illustration, and made as abstract and unattractive as possible."[5] However once this has been accomplished and "truth is once laid hold of, it is easy to discover and display its beauty; and this, the last and easiest process, is what remains to be done for Political Economy."[6] She went on to say that the classicals gave us the history of the subject, but what "we want is its picture." From this idea was born the many illustrations she used so aptly to apply economic principles for those who did not "have time to apply them themselves."

The Plan

Martineau relied on the body of economic knowledge which existed in her day. She did not claim to be an economist but rather defined herself as a popularizer of economic ideas. Although she meticulously based her volumes

on principles set out in James Mill's Elements of Political Economy and on standard works like the Wealth of Nations and Malthus's Essay on Population, she was still subject to reproach. Halfway through the Illustrations series, she responded to critics, whom she believed, misunderstood her purpose. She wrote, "No one can be more sensible than I am myself of the slightness and small extent of the information conveyed in my Tables." But, she maintained, the object of the work was to "exhibit a few plain, permanent principles, to furnish others with the requisites to an opinion (not to give opinions on temporary questions, herself.)"[7]

The main thrust of the economic content in the Illustrations was toward economic ideas which she considered crucial to the workingman; ideas which are core elements of any treatise on economic education. She wrote:

> We propose to show what Labour can effect and how it is to be encouraged and economized and rewarded: to treat of Capital, its nature and operation, and the proportions of its increase; and to exhibit the union of these two mighty agents of PRODUCTION. Under the second head, DISTRIBUTION, occur the great questions of Rent, Profits, Wages, and Population, the various modes of Interchange at home and abroad, including the consideration of all Monopolies, domestic and foreign. Under the third head, CONSUMPTION, are considered the modes of Demand and Supply, and of Taxation. All these and many more will be exemplified in sketches of society, in narratives of those who labour and earn and spend, who are happy or otherwise, according as the institutions under which they live are good or bad.[8]

Martineau wanted her books to be read and wanted these economic principles explained to the layman in the most appealing way possible. She wrote twenty-five tales, each tale illustrating a different economic concept. The tales were all centered around very identifiable everyday characters. The characters were shown coping with the daily struggles of life and accepting the inevitable hardships that fate doled out in early nineteenth century England. Throughout each narrative was an explanation of an economic principle and invariably an accompanying analysis of how contemporary misguided legislation which ignored the economic law under scrutiny had resulted in unpleasant and unnecessary events.

An Illustration

The style of the twenty-four tales (the last book of the series was a summary) was similar. As an illustration let us look at the story entitled "Demerara," the first tale in the second volume of the series. This tale was the most controversial of the group because of the nature of the subject of the story, slavery. Martineau wanted to attract an audience to instruct them in economics. Controversy did not hurt to advertise her works.

Each tale had a main character through whom economic truth was imparted. In this story, the son of a plantation owner returned to the West Indies from Great Britain where he had learned the principles of political economy. (As the story unfolds, it becomes obvious that he has also picked up a good deal of sociology.) The son instructed the plantation owners (and the readers) about the nature of invested capital and also enlightened them regarding the respective values of different kinds of labor. The young man, while explaining property rights to the slave holders, concluded that "Man has no right to hold Man in property."[9]

At the same time as the main "discourser" was presenting his message, a secondary theme was developing. This concerned the plight of a rebellious slave family. The reader was beguiled into following the courageous attempt of a young slave to find freedom.

The son brought out the benefits of wage labor over slave labor and actually demonstrated its superior productivity on the plantation. But the experiment could not work within the West Indian environment and the fate of the slaves following the trial of the free market plan was worse than ever.

British trade policy which prohibited the importation of sugar from everywhere except the West Indies assured the profitability of the slave trade. Once again (Martineau was emphasizing) ignorant policy makers had caused widespread misery through their lack of comprehension of basic economic laws. Free trade would shift the production of sugar to lands where workers were more abundant and slaves would not have to be employed; free trade would also lower the price of sugar and force the marginal producers who depended on slave labor out of business.

The plantation's troubles increased. The only hope lay in the son (and daughter) taking over the business (if they could) to save the plantation. The son gave his sister this advice: "The fate of our slaves depends on the state of my father's affairs. I commend their comfort to you. Soften their hardships as much as your influence allows, and then my father will soon find that their happiness and his prosperity go together."[10]

Meanwhile, the escaping slaves in the subplot were captured and killed by the pursuing hounds. The son gave some farewell advise on the proper use of economic concepts in managing day to day affairs before he departed for England again. And, finally, Miss Martineau summarized the whole tale. The culmination of her summary was the omnipresent warning against government:

> Let us see, then, what is the responsibility of the legislative in this matter.
>
> The slave system inflicts an incalculable amount of human suffering, for the sake of making a wholesale waste of labour and capital.
>
> Since the slave system is only supported by legislative protection, the legislature is responsible for the misery caused by direct infliction, and for the injury indirectly occasioned by the waste of labour and capital.[11]

Martineau's pursuit of spreading the word about the midadventures of government in the world economic was relentless.

Criticism

Some classical economists who were contemporaries of Harriet Martineau were neither kind to her personally nor in sympathy with her efforts in economic education. John Stuart Mill accused her of reducing laissez-faire to "an absurdity." Mill also called her a "mere tyro."[12] Martineau believed that Mill's feelings were prompted by a personal dispute between them and therefore their veracity was questionable. However Mill may have been chaffed by the enormous popularity of her easily understood work compared to the relatively meager sales of his complex Principles of Political Economy.

But Martineau was well aware of criticism and as the last books of the Illustrations series were published she included various responses to her critics in the prefaces of these numbers. Addressing those who had accused her of a lack of originality, she wrote:

> It must be perfectly needless to explain what I owe to preceeding writers on the science of which I have treated. Such an

> acknowledgement could only accompany a pretension of my own to have added something to the science - a pretension which I have never made. By dwelling, as I have been led to, on their discoveries, I have become too much awakened to the glory to dream of sharing the honour. Great men must have their hewers of wood and drawers of water; and scientific discoverers must be followed by those who will popularize their discoveries. When the woodman finds it necessary to explain that the forest is not of his planting, I may begin to particularize my obligation to Smith and Malthus, and others of their high order.[13]

Martineau also responded to the oft-repeated accusation of the overbearing melancholy which characterized her tales. She thought the tales more truthful than melancholic; experience was the best teacher, she believed, but the lessons were not painless to learn: "we must enter through tribulation into truth." Some hardships were not the result of nature but were occasioned by "an unwise administration of social affairs." This led her to justify her attacks on economic policy makers. She wrote, "In so far as an administration is wise, there is no occasion to write about it; for its true principles are already brought to a practical recognition, and nothing remains to be done ... this much in defense, - not of my tales, but of the venerable experimental method which is answerable for their being sad."[14]

Success

The criticism of her works did not deter sales. By 1834, ten thousand copies of the monthly number of the series were being sold.[15] (This should be contrasted with J. S. Mill's sales of three thousand copies of his Principles of Political Economy in 4 years.) The Illustrations was a project with very

humble beginnings. Martineau was unable to find a publisher to back her fully, but the brother of a friend, Charles Fox, promised to publish her work conditionally. She had to personally sign up a minimum number of subscribers before publication began and had to accept the publisher's further caveat that if the entire issue of the first number were not sold, the series would be cancelled. The results of the publication of the first tale in the series was overwhelming. When "Life in The Wilds" came out in February 1832, the entire first run of fifteen hundred copies was sold in ten days. By the end of the first year of sales, the daily total for each number had reached one hundred.

The twenty-five books were published one each month for twenty-five consecutive months. Each tale was at least one hundred and thirty pages long and each page contained approximately two hundred and fifty words. Martineau's abilities were taxed to their utmost. She relied on the classical economists' published works for her economic theory and tried to include in her narratives all aspects of the complex subjects they covered. To interject practical elements into her tales, Martineau used other sources of information such as government blue books, the library at the House of Commons, and the advice of friendly experts. Her technique of writing was responsible for enabling her to research and produce so much in so short a period of time: when she committed a word to paper, she never changed it.

This technique, however was also responsible for the uneven quality of her work. She wrote in haste and did not rewrite her ideas so sometimes the quality of her work depended upon her feelings of the moment. During the years 1832-1834, she was beset with family difficulties and plagued with continual health problems which affected her throughout her life. Additionally, if a topic appealed to her, its presentation was better than some of those which were not so personally satisfying. Nevertheless, the public enjoyed her books and continued to buy them for the entire duration of the series.

Other Works and Deeds

Although Harriet Martineau's Illustrations of Political Economy was her best known work in economic education, she produced many other works. Shortly after Illustrations of Political Economy, she completed Illustrations of Taxation (5 volumes) and Poor Laws and Paupers (4 volumes) for the same publisher, Charles Fox. The format was the same in all three series and the last of these works was completed by 1834. Her written work in economic education, per se, was finished.

She then wrote several "travel books," Retrospect of Western Travel and Society in America, describing her trip to America following the success of her Illustrations. She dabbled in a few works of fiction in the 1840's with Deerbrook, The Playfellow, and The Hour and The Man and then turned to philosophical pursuits in Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development (with Henry George Atkinson, a collaboration she may have lived to regret) and The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte (translated by Harriet Martineau.) This translation of Comte was used for many decades to teach English speaking students Comtian philosophy. Comte himself was said to have asked Martineau to retranslate the work into French, because her translation was so much easier to understand than his original work. Having written several outstanding historical works and sixteen hundred editorials and magazine articles, Martineau's penchant for educating continued to show through in her writing of "how-to" books. A walking tour of the English lakes was described in A Complete Guide to the English Lakes, The Guide to Service and Household Education told about management of the household; and Our Farm of Two Acres gave a blueprint for running a small farm. Martineau's literary output was prodigious.

Later in life, Martineau tried a hands-on experiment with economic education. She gathered the rural workers from around her house in Amblesides once

a week in the evening for a "lecture" on contemporary political or economic topics or on practical advice on running a farm. She lectured to this audience every winter but two from 1848 - 1854. Reportedly the talks were good; a partition had to be removed to double the size of the schoolroom lecture hall.

Summary and Conclusions

Harriet Martineau was the most widely read economic educator of the nineteenth century; she may have been the most widely read writer of economics at the time as well. She wrote for the masses; she was convinced that it was each citizen's civic duty to learn economics in order to counteract the follies of economic policy makers.

Martineau believed that economic principles could best reach her audience through simple stories. She attempted to introduce the concepts of production, distribution, consumption (with various ramifications) in addition to the ideas surrounding factor shares, monopolies, foreign trade, and taxation through tales which depicted the ordinary activities of the working class.

Although criticized by some contemporaries for being unoriginal, absurdly simplistic, and melancholic, her works were an enormous success. More importantly, her goal was achieved - she had reached the masses and had imparted to them core ideas in economics.

Harriet Martineau, then, truly deserves to be acclaimed as a most eminent innovator in the field of economic education. She proved that economics is a discipline that can be understood by those who sorely need its teachings but are not able or willing to plow through esoteric economic doctrines. Martineau's efforts 150 years ago were a first attempt at meeting the immense demand for the services of economic educators. Her success should be an encouragement to her intellectual descendents today.

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